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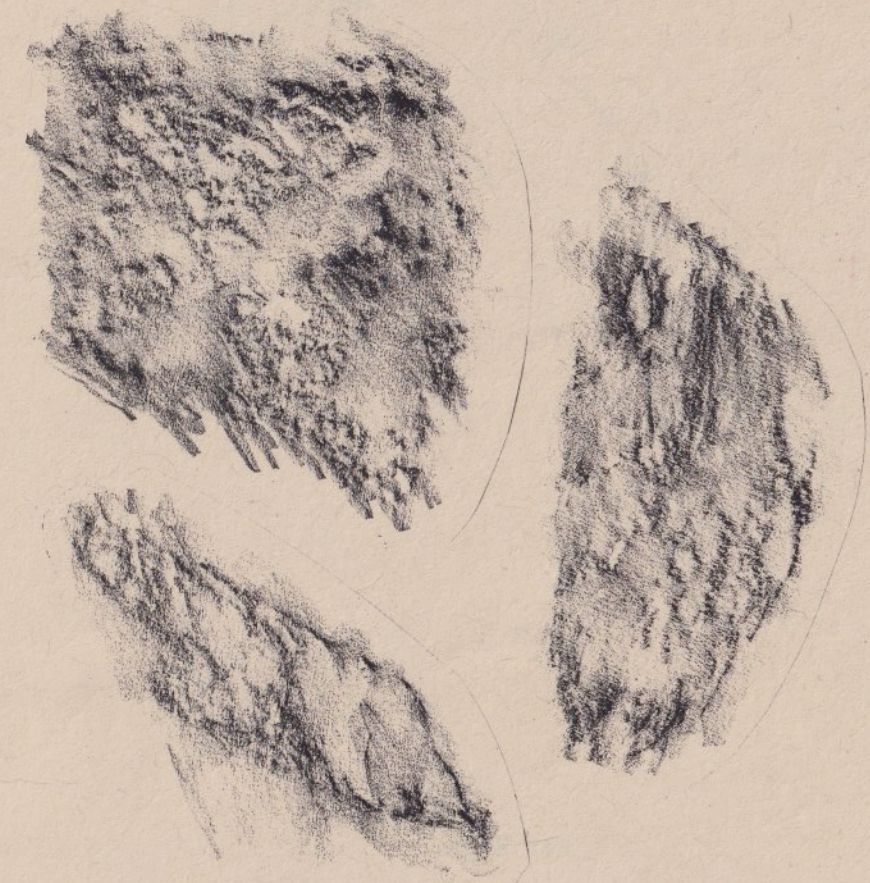


"All Ye Who Enter Herein Leave All Hopes Behind"

For HKSM

Hannah and I share a birthday. It's not the same exact day, they are two days and a few years apart, but we speak about our birthdays like it's the same day. Birthday sisters.

Hannah once sent me a panel from Ernie Bushmiller's Nancy that provided happenstance proof that Nancy shares our birthday too. Another birthday sister. The year is unknown since Bushmiller claimed to know nothing about Nancy. He probably didn't mean anything by revealing that day as hers, her birthday isn't captured in any Nancy research materials.

The birth of the Nancy character happened on January 2, 1933, when Bushmiller first introduced her in Fritzi Ritz, a comic strip he inherited from Larry Whittington in May 1925. He planned to keep her for about a week and then dump her. Nancy came to life and stole the show instead.

There is a chance Bushmiller did choose to celebrate Nancy's birthday on that exact date. It's possible Bushmiller, who did not work on Wednesdays or Thursdays, sketched Nancy for the first time on Frid ay, December 30, 1932, which falls within the week before her debut. It could also be a pure coincidence since Bushmiller was described as remarkably free from sentimentality. By either date, Nancy is still a birthday sister and each panel can be read as a Capricorn's reflection.

Nancy remains stoic and aloof while assuming command. She finds creatively unconventional solutions to everyday problemswith a mischievousness that rarely stems from malic but rather a curibsity and a desire to have fun. Nancy navigates life resiliently on her own terms and interprets the world through a simple, naive lens that leads to poignant observations.

Nancy's best friend, and sometimes boyfriend, Sluggo, arrived five years later, in 1938.

Capricorn Nancy encourages Sluggo's quests for self-improvement but quickly gets jealous when other girls, like her rival Trixie, pay attention to his improvements.

Nancy would have hated to know that Sluggo was a more popular character with audiences at one point. On the packaging for a Sluggo doll, Nancy was only referred to as "and girl friend."

When Nancy wants other characters to know she doesn't care that they offended her in some way, she seeks them out and turns her back on them.

"All my characters are conceived in desperation"
--Ernie Bushmiller

The characters and everything else in a panel is there for the sake of the gag. Thes is the whole simple reason why Nancy exists. She never has to confront the angst, dread, or despair that comes with questioning the reason for existing.

She just has to help tell a joke.

Bushmiller explained his process as working backwards. He started with the last panel and then filled in the pieces of the joke one panel at a time until he reached the first.

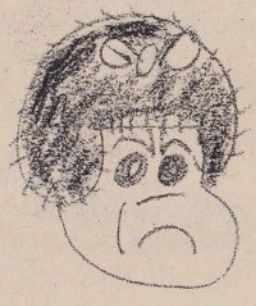
For Bushmiller, the last panel was the chuckle-panel, or the snapper. It was the most important thing. The shorter the distance between first and last panel, mentally, the better.

"Whenever I'm really stuck for a gag, I look through a Sears Roebuck catalog. Usually my eye hits on some article, like an ironing board."

Walls, floors, rocks, trees, ice cream cones, motion lines and iconic truisms: school sucks, bullies suck, blondes are pretty, salesmen travel, little green men live on mars, and modern art is a hoax.

Matt Groening, the creator of The Simpsons, placed Nancy on his Top Favorite Things list. Bushmiller's direct simplicity was a huge inspiration for his graphic style, which means Nancy is one reason why we have The Simpsons. First airing in the late eighties, it made its debut appearance on The Tracey Ullman Show. The only reason why I mention this is because Tracey Ullman is another birthday sister, sharing the same day as Nancy and Hannah.

Other notable items on Matt's list: 5. Igor Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring (2 piano version), 32. Anything by Erik Satie, 36. Ren & Stimpy, 40. Wim Wenders's Wings of Desire, 52. The Fugs's It Crawled Into My Hand, Honest, 56. Thrift Store Paintings edited by Jim Shaw, 66. bananas, 76. Crazy by Patsy Cline, 78. Raymond Carver's Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, 87. Flannery O'Connor's Collected Stories, 88. Pee-Wee's Playhouse, 89. John Cleese's Fawlty Towers, 100. Any video bloopers featuring small animals biting TV personalities.



Judy was another desperate character. She was Nancy's look-alike cousin and they hated each other. Bushmiller just made a second Nancy for the joke because Nancy was foolproof.

Another Nancy connection I noticed Hannah shares is her big, friendly dog, Rolo who has a good sense of humor. Nancy has a rich friend named Rollo (Haveall) once named Marmaduke in the forties. The Marmaduke comic strip about a funny big dog came out in the fifties and probably encouraged Bushmiller to change his character's name to better match the dry economy of nominative determinism so common throughout the Nancy universe.

It is alleged that Bushmiller spent three years in England in the inner circle of Aleister Crowley and Madame Blavatsky, both influential figures in the occult and theosophical movements. His bully character, Spike, shares a likeness with Crowley. It can be hard to know what is a hoax or not when it comes to Nancy and Bushmiller lore. Especially when the source is from a member of the Secret Bushmiller Society--they had discovered entries in the Theosophical Society's diaries that support the theory.

Bushmiller referred to himself as a square, so to think he would travel to England and hang out with occultists seems unlikely. Although, he did illustrate Harry Houdini's weekly new spaper insert in the twenties, but HH was devoted to exposing occultist frauds and Crowley was a rebel against societal norms that Bushmiller lived squarely with in.

Bushmiller hoaxes are abundant. Perhaps because of the specific humor and aesthetic appreciation that Nancy attracts. These people make up the Secret Bushmiller society, both a hoax in just existing and a genuine group of people who engage in a shared interest in Bushmiller's Nancy. The society created itself organically through the actions of chance participants. This is how societies are built. The Secret Bushmiller Society was easy to build because Nancy's image is easy to reproduce, appealing, supported by accessible everyday objects, and does not try to represent anything other than itself. The only agenda involved is a respect for easy-to-digest visual languages and the drive to laugh at the absurdity of our existance (which Nancy never has to question.). What drove Bushmiller's Nancy back then was the gag. What drives it now, decades later is the out-of-context power each panel holds in our attention strained era. Fragments are what we can best handle, and all we want is to relate to them.

The spirit of the secret society is to insert Nancy into unexpected places like unsolicited mailers, posters, Busch and Miller beer labels combined in stores, postcards left in tourist gift shops, in acts of inverted shoplifting, three rocks placed in conspicuous places to mimic Bushmiller's signature

background detail, and costumed Nancys appearing at unrelated events.

A mysterious ly meaningless billboard used to stand outside a small Pennsylvania village calle d Bowers. While it caused a stir, no one ever seemed to take a photograph of it.

Storms twice blew it over, and a truck left it struck down in a d itch for a winter in the early 2000s. It is gone no w, replaced with a chili pepper festival sign, It used to show Nancy holding a telephone to her ear, smiling.

The billboard owner hated billboards, so as an act of resistance, he painted Nancy. While fixing up an old house he found a newspaper from the fifties featuring a Nancy comic strip. He thought she would be something fun to see, and Nancy just wants to have a good, fun time. The local Mennonites loved the billboard, everyone else thought it might be anti-government code for marijuana.

Another Bushmiller related hoax is the Samuel Beckett correspondence, first published in an independent magazine devoted to mixing pop culture, philosophy, and cultural criticism. In a 1999 issue of Hermenaut, A.S. Hamrah speculated what the post-modernist Beckett might write to everyday-man Bushmiller, highlighting the sparse, absur d style they both shared. In one letter,, Beckett writes, "There is nothing funnier than unhappiness."

Ernie Bushmiller dropped out of school at fourteen and tried art classes at the National Academy of Design, but decided he wasn't very good at drawing.

He worked for a newspaper as a speech balloon latterer and eventually worked on Houdini's insert. He took over Larry Whittington's Fritzi Ritz strip. Whittington got wooed by another newspaper, probably offering him more money, to create a Fritzi knockoff that never took off in the same way.

Larry Whittington does not have a devoted secret society. But he does have a history. Fritzi Ritz was created in 1922, a strip about trendy materialistic flappe r girls and their year nings: money, fashion, makeup, and rich, handsome men.

Whittington modeled Fritzi and her lifestyle after his sister, Marjorie, "the girl with the million dollar legs" and a member of the Ziegfeld Follies. Ziegfeld

Girls were beautiful chorus girl s who paraded down stair s dressed up as things like birds and boats. The Ziegfeld behind the Follies was Flo, known as the "glorifier of the American girl."

Flo fired sixteen-year-old Lucille Ball after five days and she tried to throw herself in front of a limousine in a desperate act to end her despair.

Flo said Marjorie had perfect feet and the shapeliest legs. A Cincinnati newspaper proudly claimed her as a hometown hero printing, "Cincinnat Girls Legs Called Shapeliest."

Flo also said the art with which nature has shaped her legs, their faultless symmetry encouraged him to insure her legs for a quarter million dollars. Today that is four million dollars.

In an article published in another newspaper, Marjorie is again celebrated for having perfect feet because she never had to wear shoes as a child. The article is titled "Woman Will Soon Be A Four-Toed Creature" and claims that high heels are making the small toe on women's feet obsolete.

I was reared in the way nature intended us all to live," says the "golden-haired beauty.""My mother never constricted my feet with shoes of any kind when I was a baby. She gave Nature free play to

mold her work as she would.

Then, when I was old enough to go to school, mother insisted upon plain sandals as mere protection to the soles of my feet. Since I have grown to girlhood, I have never worn a high-heeled slipper. I adopted the baby doll slipper long before it was in vogue. And to its comfort and grace I believe I owe the compliment paid me by no less an artist Charles Dana Gibson."

The artist mentioned was the creator of the Gibson Girl, an iconic representation of the beautiful and independent American woman at the turn of the twentieth century. Marjorie used to pose for Gibson, validating her type of beauty being in style at the time of her news article. To imagine what the real life Fritzi Ritz looked like, you would just have to look into Gibson's portfolio from the nineteen twenties.

Marjorie gained her reputation for having the perfect legs and feet when she won a nation-wide contest, winning against thousands of other pairs of feet. Then her feet took her to New York City.

Marjorie was reported to be a frail child who turned to physical exercise to become healthier. Her acts in the Follies included a pogo stick and whistling.

Marjorie Whittington is another reason why we have <u>The Simpsons.</u>

In 1928
Larry and Marjorie go night swimming with a friend in the East River near Flushings, Queens. The friend gets a cramp, Marjorie goes into hysterics, Larry rescues her and their friend drowns.

In 1930
Larry injures his arm in a car accident and stops drawing.

In 1931
Marjorie crashes her car into a pillar at the Flushings end of the Roosevelt Avenue Bridge and is seriously injured. She has a fifty thousand dollar insurance policy against injury to her legs.

In 1932
Larry lightly stabs a man with a knife after he sees him kick Marjorie during a party at Lake Archer in Massachusetts. They each are ordered to pay the man a twenty five dollar fine.

In 1942
Larry is fatally struck by a car while crossing the street in Queens at age thirty nine.

In 1957
Marjorie collapses and dies on a subway platform in Grand Central Station, age fifty five.

Although Larry left Fritzi, I'm sure he was still very present in the cartoonist scene. There were several haunts in Manhattan where a cartoonist could get a cocktail and a steak after drawing pictures all day. The Inkwell Bar and Grill was one of these hangouts located at 693 Third Avenue between 43rd and 44th. It was just down the street from the newspaper offices, and its walls were fair game for leaving trademark characters painted behind.

The Inkwell had a two-manned kitchen, a piano, a jukebox, and a cat named Mousie. Thursday nights offered free-eats parties and booths for gossiping. The address is now a generic midtown chocolate shop.

The city cartoonists probably played games like exquisite corpse on cocktail napkins. Or they invented their own.

Scott McCloud made a game called Five Card Nancy, in which players use random panels of Nancy to create their own stories. It can be played with three or more people, and the first person to get rid of their cards wins.

First, print copies of Bushmiller's Nancy comic strips onto white card-stock and cut each panel out. Then play:

1. Place all panels face down in a pile

2. Shuffle and deal five random panels to each player

3. Pick a single panel from the pile and place it face up as Panel One

4. Each player picks one card from their hand that they think would make a good next panel and places it next to Panel One

5. If a player must pass, they can swap with the pull pile

6. A judge or judges decide if the choice is a good next panel

   Yes? it stays.

   No? it goes.

"By the time you decided not to read it, you already had"
--Wally Wood, MAD Magazine